



Adolescents' Awareness of Racial Inequality in the Early Stages of Critical Reflection Development



Janae Shaheed¹, Marketa Burnett¹, Heidi Vuletich¹, Beth Kurtz-Costes¹ & Stephanie Rowley²

¹Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

² Department of Psychology, The University of Michigan, USA

Introduction

As adolescents' cognitive skills mature, their ability to understand social inequalities increases (Hope & Bañales, 2018). In Critical Consciousness (CC) theory, the process of becoming aware of and acting against oppression is referred to as critical reflection (Diemer et al., 2016). Research suggests that critical consciousness may serve as a protective factor for marginalized youth (Diemer, et al., 2016), indicating the importance of investigating its developmental trajectory. Early adolescents maintain beliefs of a just society (Godfrey et al., 2017), but little research has investigated how these beliefs may change across adolescence. The purpose of this study was to assess adolescents' perceptions of opportunity and of race differences in achievement-related outcomes.



Method

Participants

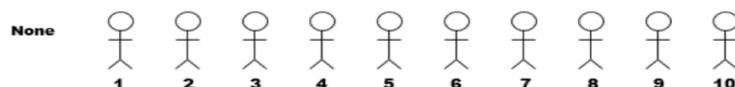
Participants were 115 tenth graders (71 girls; 27 African American, 38 Hispanic, 33 non-Hispanic White, 14 Bi/Multiracial; 3 participants were missing race data) from a rural high school in the southeastern U.S. serving mostly low-income families.

Measures

Awareness of Racial Inequality. Students reported their perceptions of race/ethnic differences in opportunity by rating agreement on a 7-point scale with three items ($\alpha = .85$) regarding opportunity equality (e.g. "Adults who are members of certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances than others to get good jobs in this country").

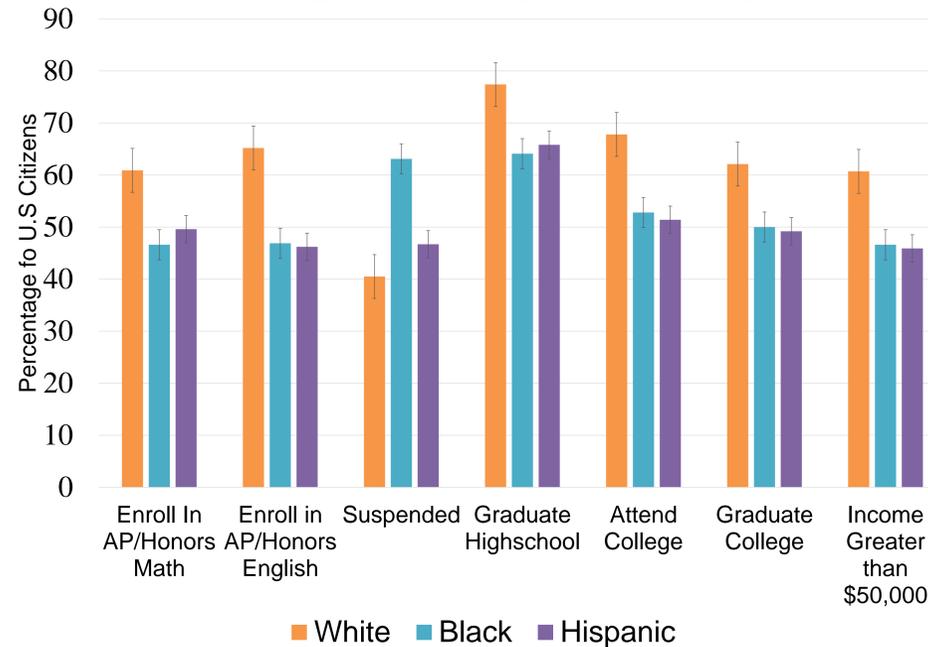
U.S Racial Differences. To report perceptions of race/ethnic differences in outcomes, for each racial/ethnic group (Blacks, Whites, Hispanics) students selected how many out of a group of ten adults would achieve a certain outcome.

Think about **White people** in the United States. Out of a group of 10 White people, how many do you think **graduate from high school**?



Results

Students' Perception of Percentage Of U.S Citizens Achieving Outcomes By Race/Ethnicity



Awareness of Racial Inequality On average, students slightly disagreed with statements about racial/ethnic opportunity inequality (M = 3.37, SD = 1.35; 3 = slightly disagree).

Student Perceptions of Achievement Gap Despite students' lack of agreement with statements about racial/ethnic inequality, repeated measures ANOVAs showed that students reported significant group differences in achievement behaviors and outcomes.

Student Perceptions vs. National Data Comparing students' estimates of achievement to national data for each outcome, students tended to underestimate percentages of high school graduates and to overestimate all other academic behaviors. In their perceptions of racial/ethnic differences, on all items students accurately reported White students as the most likely to meet achievement goals, but least likely to be suspended.

Student Perception vs. National Data: Percentage of U.S. Citizens Achieving Outcomes by Race/Ethnicity

	Students' Perceptions			National Data		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
Enroll in AP/Honors Math	61.5	46.6	50.1	17.0	6.0	12.0
Enroll in AP/Honors English	65.7	46.4	46.1	36.0	27.0	26.0
Suspended	41.1	63.2	46.1	4.31	15.4	5.95
Graduate high school	77.3	64.7	65.0	94.3	87.9	71.6
Attend College	68.1	53.7	51.0	66.2	55.3	40.9
Graduate College	62.8	49.6	48.0	49.8	35.6	26.4
Income Greater than \$50,000	61.6	46.1	46.0	40.0	23.8	20.6

Note. National percentages were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics and 2017 Census data.

Discussion

Adolescents' responses to the race inequality measure accurately reflected race/ethnic differences as noted in national data. These findings show that they are beginning to notice how race plays a role in achievement outcomes. However, our results show that while adolescents recognize differences in outcomes, they do not attribute them to differences in opportunities. Although adolescents understand that White students are more likely to graduate from high school and college than students of color, they have yet to connect those outcomes back to racial disparities in opportunity. When discussing the process of critical reflection development, bridging the gap between noticing disparities and understanding the structural inequities driving them may be the next step for adolescents.

References

- Diemer, M. A., Rapa, L. J., Voight, A. M., & McWhirter, E. H. (2016). Critical consciousness: A developmental approach to addressing marginalization and oppression. *Child Development Perspectives*, 10(4), 216-221.
- Godfrey, E. B., Santos, C. E., & Burson, E. (Accepted/In press). For Better or Worse? System-Justifying Beliefs in Sixth-Grade Predict Trajectories of Self-Esteem and Behavior Across Early Adolescence. *Child Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12854>
- Hope, E.C., & Bañales, J. (2018). Black early adolescent critical reflection of inequitable sociopolitical conditions: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. Advanced online publication. doi: 10.1177/0743558418756360